



**MEI**  
Policy Center



# LEBANON'S CATALYST FOR RENEWAL



**BILAL Y. SAAB**

FEBRUARY 2021



Photo above: Lebanese President, Michel Aoun (C) meets Former Prime Minister of Lebanon, Saad Hariri (R), and Speaker of the Parliament Nabih Berri (L) in Beirut, Lebanon on October 22, 2020. Photo by [Lebanese Presidency/Handout/Anadolu Agency via Getty Images](#).

“

*Killon yaani killon*  
 (“all of them means  
 all of them”) is an  
 incredibly heavy  
 lift. Probably an  
 impossible one too.

The Arab uprisings of the past decade have produced some of the most glorious and memorable phrases.

From *al-shaab yurid isqat al-nizam* (“the people want to topple the regime”) and *irha!* (“leave!”) to *thawra!* (“revolution!”) and *silmiya, silmiya* (“peaceful, peaceful”), Arabs from various parts of the region and all walks of life have joined together in chant expressing their desire for justice, dignity, and opportunity.

Though revolutionary slogans by definition are imbued with idealism, one seemed to stand out from the rest for its boldness and rejection of compromise. *Killon yaani killon* (“all of them means all of them”)<sup>1</sup> was heard across Lebanon in 2019 when thousands of Lebanese took to the streets demanding the removal of not just a political leader or a government but the entire political class for its systematic corruption and direct role in leading the country to financial ruin and humanitarian catastrophe.

# “What might serve as a catalyst for change is civil society and reform-oriented political parties coming together to form a larger political force that can ... gradually alter the political rules of the game.”

Though this wasn't the first time the Lebanese fought for their rights — they did it in spectacular fashion on March 14, 2005 when they called for the ousting of Syrian troops from the country and again in 2015 when they erupted against the Lebanese government for failing to find a solution to an endemic garbage collection crisis<sup>2</sup> — the 2019 demonstrations certainly were the most audacious and ambitious to date.

## A heavy lift

*Killon yaani killon* is an incredibly heavy lift. Probably an impossible one too. It's no surprise that today, Lebanon's oligarchs are in the same place they were two years ago, jockeying for position and trying to cut deals at the expense of the Lebanese people while still failing to form a new cabinet. The fact that no Lebanese politician was held accountable for the enormous and deadly Beirut port explosion in August 2020<sup>3</sup> shows how far the Lebanese protesters are from fulfilling their hopes and dreams.

The protesters can't be faulted for demanding overarching change. They correctly diagnosed the problem: Lebanon's political formula — which apportions power on the basis of religion, promotes patronage, undermines civil rights, and makes a mockery of the public good — is a fundamental obstacle to societal development. And it constantly breeds political instability and deadlock.

But the big question remains how the Lebanese can hit the reset button. How can they overhaul a system that still enjoys the support of a large swath of Lebanese society and has so many powerful political backers both at home and abroad?

## Civil society's limitations

Earlier this year, I wrote<sup>4</sup> that Lebanon's civil society — a very diverse group of activists, lawyers, medical professionals, students, artists, intellectuals, media personalities, and businesspeople — holds the key to national rehabilitation. While I stand by my assertion, I'd like to qualify it a bit. Civil society cannot be the *only* agent of real

change in the country because on its own, it's unlikely it will be able to drastically reform what is a deeply entrenched sectarian and feudal system.

Even if civil society campaigns better, recruits from all sects, and somehow unites its ranks — and that's a big if — it might not convincingly win in the 2022 national elections and create a reformist bloc in the Lebanese Parliament because the challenges ahead are steep.

And the answer is not *more* assistance from the outside, be it from Washington or Paris. While helpful, external support is not going to be the difference maker. In my view, what might serve as a catalyst for change is civil society and reform-oriented political parties coming together to form a larger political force that can seriously compete in the upcoming elections, win more seats, and gradually alter the political rules of the game.

I understand that's something most of the Lebanese protesters might not want to hear. They have made it clear they don't trust any of the country's politicians, hence their unbending slogan. They prefer to preserve the independence of their reformist movement. Some even have said they'd rather lose in the 2022 elections than cooperate with politicians.

It's hard not to respect and admire that moral position. But it's also foolish not to recognize it might be practically self-defeating. Civil society is too weak to duel with a resilient political system by itself. It desperately needs what political parties possess: experience in government and campaign work, convening power, fundraising and networking capabilities, and international outreach.

To reiterate and be crystal clear, we're not talking about politicians who still cling to the old ways, but rather ones who firmly believe in retiring the current system, have credibly “defected from the political mafia,” and have demonstrably taken concrete steps to reform. Admittedly, they're not many. But they do exist. One of them is Samy Gemayel, the current head of the Kataeb party.





Photo above: Lebanese demonstrators wave national flags during a demonstration against the government, on the 10th day of protests across Lebanon. Photo by Marwan Naamani/picture alliance via Getty Images.

“Three years ago, I asked if Samy (and others like him) could help alter Lebanon’s political landscape, given his genuine desire for structural reform. I remain curious about him because he comes across as a sincere believer in a new Lebanon.”

**“[In the 2018 elections] he walked alone, refusing to ally with any traditional political party. His decision cost the Kataeb seats and influence, but that was a price he was willing to pay.”**

## **A new politics?**

Three years ago, I asked<sup>5</sup> if Samy (and others like him) could help alter Lebanon's political landscape, given his genuine desire for structural reform. I remain curious about him because he comes across as a sincere believer in a new Lebanon. And it's not just his speeches that are compelling, it's the actions he has taken over the years that have earned him some credibility given that they have generated tangible political costs for his party.

The latest example is how he ran in the 2018 parliamentary elections. He walked alone, refusing to ally with any traditional political party. His decision cost the Kataeb seats and influence, but that was a price he was willing to pay. Samy wanted to prove to civil society that he was one of them and he shared their vision. This desire continues to this day.

Samy doesn't seem to be a reformer by accident or circumstance. He says he has been the same person with the same set of political beliefs for more than two decades.<sup>6</sup>

He was born in 1980 to an influential Christian political family that produced heads of state, ministers, and parliamentarians. His father is former Lebanese President Amine Gemayel (1982-1988) and his uncle is Bashir Gemayel, probably the most polarizing public figure the country has ever seen. Bashir founded and commanded the Lebanese Forces militia during the Lebanese civil war (1975-1990) to kick the armed forces of Palestinian leader Yasser Arafat out of the country (like all other Lebanese militias with the exception of Hezbollah, the Lebanese Forces were disarmed after the civil war ended and now operate as a normal political party). In 1982, he was elected president. But less than a month later, and before he even took office, he was murdered by the Syrians. Samy's older brother, Pierre, was assassinated in 2006, most likely by the same killers. He was a minister in Lebanese premier Fouad Siniora's cabinet, representing the Kataeb.

Death and tragedy in the family followed Samy throughout his life. Like many others of his generation, he had a visceral hatred for the Syrian regime not only for subjugating his father and killing his brother and uncle, but also for occupying Lebanon from 1990 to 2005.

Samy's political activism started in school at the Lycée Français around the age of 15. He and his best friend Albert Kostanian, now a strategy consultant and talk show host in Lebanon, formed a body called the Independent Lebanese Movement to which they recruited dozens of other students from all sects of Lebanese society. Their first product, which ultimately became their manifesto, was an 80-page review of the Lebanese constitution making the case for structural reforms.

At the Université Saint Joseph, Samy was heavily involved in the national student movement. He was arrested countless times by the Lebanese authorities for demonstrating along with his friends against Syria's influence and military presence in Lebanon. Two episodes, however, he remembers vividly to this day.



**Samy doesn't seem to be a reformer by accident or circumstance. He says he has been the same person with the same set of political beliefs for more than two decades.**

In November 1998, soon after the school semester started, he organized a large anti-Syrian protest on campus. He and his collaborators printed signs saying *irhali souriyya* ("leave Syria") and glued them to their chests. Following the demonstration, they were stopped by a Lebanese military checkpoint as they were driving home. They had totally forgotten to remove the signs on their shirts. The Lebanese soldier got them out of the car and interrogated them. It wasn't long before they got arrested and taken to a Lebanese military prison where they were beaten for hours by guards.

Then in early 2000, Samy got into more serious trouble. Lebanon, a satellite state of Syria at the time, was celebrating the 30-year anniversary of the coming to power of Syrian President Hafez al-Assad (he died later that year). Syrian flags and posters of Hafez were everywhere, and particularly in the Lebanese Christian areas, just to subtly remind its residents of who was in charge of the country.

For Samy and many others, it was an unbearable and embarrassing sight. He decided to climb one of the power line posts in the predominantly Christian area of Antelias and pick up a Syrian flag with the intention of burning it on campus.

Soon after, against the advice of his friends, he lit the flag on fire amid chants of Lebanese freedom and independence. That same day in the afternoon as he and Albert were having a sandwich near school, he received a call on his cell phone from a man with a Syrian accent, who threatened to torture and kill him. Samy was 20 years old at the time. Petrified and visibly shaken, he told a confused and worried Albert they had to leave immediately. As they got up, Albert's phone rang. It was the same man with the same message.

When Samy arrived home, he found his mother in tears. She said she had just spoken with former Lebanese military intelligence director Brigadier George Khoury (who was serving as Lebanon's ambassador to the Vatican at the time), who told her he could no longer protect Samy from the Syrians and their Lebanese allies.

That evening, the Gemayel family had a meeting and decided to send Samy to Paris for a few weeks until things calmed down. Samy didn't want to leave because he refused to concede, but in the end he respected his parents' wishes. Less than two weeks

later, he elected to return. On the plane, he prayed nonstop he wouldn't get arrested or killed upon his arrival at the Lebanese airport.

As Samy got older, he began to question the choices of Kataeb leaders and to the extent possible, chart his own way. He gradually distanced himself from the traditional politics of his more senior colleagues who, to ensure political survival, often had to cooperate with other Lebanese parties that had political understandings with status quo powers including Hezbollah.

Since his entry into the Lebanese Parliament in 2009 as a member of the Kataeb, Samy has proposed dozens of pieces of legislation<sup>7</sup> that focus on transparency, accountability, local governance, and administrative decentralization. Most of them, however, were blocked by Parliament Speaker Nabih Berri, a close ally of Hezbollah and a key guardian of the corrupt Lebanese system.

In 2015, Samy was elected as head of the Kataeb and he didn't waste time in forging a new path for the party. In his new capacity, he instructed three party members to resign from the Lebanese government because he objected to two major cabinet decisions in which he suspected massive fraud: the building of the Jannah Dam<sup>8</sup> in the northern city of Jbeil and the garbage sea dump<sup>9</sup> in the region of Jdeideh. Samy's move, which landed his party in the opposition, was highly unpopular among several Kataeb colleagues and it led to the departure of Sejean Azzi, the party's vice president, who represented the old guard.

Samy's course corrective measures wouldn't stop there. In 2016, he daringly stood against a historic political pact<sup>10</sup> between Samir Geagea, the leader of the Lebanese Forces, and Michel Aoun, the head of the Free Patriotic Movement, that ultimately allowed the latter to fulfill his life-long dream of becoming Lebanese president in October of that year. The deal also sought to reconcile the Christian support bases of both parties, who viciously fought in the latter part of the civil war.

Samy naturally embraced the principle of peace among the country's Christians, but he refused to bless the presidency of Aoun, who since 2006 has firmly allied himself<sup>11</sup> with Hezbollah for narrow political reasons. Samy's decision would cost him the resignation of four other members of his party's political bureau. But in the end, he would be proven right. Since Aoun took office,



**“The best path ahead for Samy and the country may be to keep building bridges not only with civil society but with other political parties who share his goals with the same passion and conviction.”**

Lebanon's situation has gone from bad to worse, inching closer to total economic collapse, a scenario that didn't materialize even in the darkest days of the civil war.

## Building bridges

Despite Samy's legacy of reform, it's still unclear if Lebanese civil society is ready to accept him because of the Kataeb's political traditionalism and feudal past. But that need not be Samy's main concern because the top priority is to pursue reform rather than be loved by civil society, which itself is divided. No doubt, civil society is a critical vehicle of reform, but it's still a means to an end.

It may also not be feasible for Samy to be both an activist and a politician at the same time. He doesn't have to undergo baptism by fire and leave the party his grandfather founded in 1936 just to prove he belongs in civil society. There's no shame in being a politician, especially not when your objective is to rise above the fray and call for a new politics. He, like others in similar positions, is more useful to the reform cause in his current capacity.

The best path ahead for Samy and the country may be to keep building bridges not only with civil society but with other political

parties who share his goals with the same passion and conviction. Neither Samy nor civil society can do this alone. They need each other in addition to the help of fellow reformist political travelers, as few as they are, because the forces wishing to protect the system are formidable.

“

**It may also not be feasible for Samy to be both an activist and a politician at the same time.**



# ENDNOTES

1. Richard Hall and Hannah Abdel-Massih, “‘All of them means all of them’: How Lebanon’s spontaneous protests over taxes led to calls for revolution,” October 30, 2019, The Independent, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/lebanon-protests-latest-corruption-middle-east-revolution-tax-a9165161.html>
2. Vivian Yee and Hwaida Saad, “To Make Sense of Lebanon’s Protests, Follow the Garbage,” December 3, 2019, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/03/world/middleeast/lebanon-protests-corruption.html>
3. Ben Hubbard, Maria Abi-Habib, Mona El-Naggar, Allison McCann, Anjali Singhvi, James Glanz, and Jeremy White, “How a Massive Bomb Came Together in Beirut’s Port,” September 9, 2020, The New York Times, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2020/09/09/world/middleeast/beirut-explosion.html>
4. Bilal Y. Saab, “Lebanon’s civil society holds key to national rehabilitation: Analysis,” January 7, 2021, ABC News, <https://abcnews.go.com/Politics/lebanons-civil-society-holds-key-national-rehabilitation-analysis/story?id=75094871>
5. Bilal Y. Saab, “Can This Man Alter Lebanon’s Political Landscape?” June 12, 2018, The National Interest, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/can-man-alter-lebanons-political-landscape-26235>
6. The author conducted several phone interviews with Samy over the past few days.
7. Samy Gemayel, “Laws proposed,” <https://www.samygemayel.com/#anchor-section1-0>
8. Habib Battah, “A Dam is Built in ‘Paradise,’” August 5, 2016, Take Part, <http://www.takepart.com/feature/2016/08/05/lebanon-jannah-dam>
9. Ellen Francis, “Mountains of garbage are piling high in Lebanon — and it’s becoming a glaring symbol of corruption in the heart of the government,” February 4, 2018, Reuters for Business Insider, <https://www.businessinsider.com/r-no-end-to-crisis-in-sight-as-lebanons-garbage-mountains-grow-2018-2>
10. Bilal Y. Saab, “Back to Lebanon’s Future,” January 26, 2016, Foreign Affairs, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/lebanon/2016-01-26/back-lebanons-future>.
11. General Michel Aoun, Hassan Nasrallah, “Memorandum of understanding by Hezbollah and Free Patriotic Movement,” February 6, 2006, Voltaire Network, <https://www.voltairenet.org/article163916.html>



# ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Bilal Y. Saab is a political-military analyst on the Middle East and U.S. policy toward the region. He specializes in the Levant and the Gulf and focuses on security cooperation between the United States and its regional partners, and national security and defense processes in Arab partner countries. He is currently completing a book tentatively titled *Rebuilding Arab Defense: The Tragedy of U.S. Security Cooperation in the Middle East* to be published by Lynne Rienner Publishers in 2021.

At the Middle East Institute (MEI), Saab is currently Senior Fellow and Director of the Defense and Security Program. In addition, he is an Associate with the Clingendael Institute in the Netherlands; a term member (2016-2021) with the Council on Foreign Relations (CFR); and an Adjunct Assistant Professor at Georgetown University's Security Studies Program in the School of Foreign Service.

Prior to MEI, Saab served as Senior Advisor for Security Cooperation (SC) in the Pentagon's Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy, with oversight responsibilities for U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM). In his capacity as the Department of Defense's lead on security cooperation in the broader Middle East, Saab supported the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy's responsibility for SC oversight by leading prioritization and strategic integration of SC resources and activities for the USCENTCOM Area of Responsibility.

He has held fellowships and research & management positions at CFR (International Affairs Fellowship 2018-2019), Atlantic Council, Middlebury Institute of International Studies' James Martin Center for Nonproliferation Studies, Brookings, Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), and MEI.



**MEI**  
Policy Center



**MEI@75**  
Peace. Prosperity. Partnership.

**WWW.MEI.EDU**